

Oliver Zimmer, *Remaking the Rhythms of Life: German Communities in the Age of the Nation-State*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2013; 416 pp., 24 illustrations; 9780199571208, £38.99 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Xosé-Manoel Núñez, *Ludwig-Maximilians Universität Munich, Germany*

National identities have been approached by historians in the last twenty years from diverse angles, from the local sphere to the global, and from the social perspective to the cultural one. However, a relatively marginalized aspect in most studies on the formation of national identities in nineteenth-century Europe has been the place reserved for local and the regional identities within the new hierarchy of loyalties increasingly imposed by nation-states and/or national movements. While the bulk of historical research on this has focused, particularly in the German-speaking context, on the emergence and variegated meanings ascribed to the term *Heimat* and local cultures, much less space has been devoted to the role of cities and, therefore, the emergence of specifically urban identities and their relation to the nation. A further vacuum was that of the redefinition of daily life brought about by urbanization and social change, along with the impact of nation-building, by applying a bottom-up perspective that emphasized the way in which national worldviews had an impact on ordinary lives, from consumption patterns to local festivities.

This is precisely the field that the Oxford-based historian Oliver Zimmer, himself a well-known specialist on the study of Swiss nationalism, comparative European nationalisms and, more specifically, on the role of national symbols to shape collective identity, attempts to cover in this study. As he explicitly declares, his aim is to shed some light on how ordinary people ‘strove to regain a sense of place in a changing world’ (1) by inquiring into the way in which urbanization and modernization influenced their ‘rhythms and routines’. The perception of time and place by the inhabitants of these towns, as well as the emotional attachment they developed to the new built environment and the rhythms of life which developed within its limits become central categories in the author’s analytic lens, which he develops in a multifaceted comparison of three medium-sized and biconfessional South-German towns during the second half of the nineteenth century: Ludwigshafen, Augsburg and Ulm, which experienced different paths of modernization – while Ulm was a traditional artisan and merchant town, Ludwigshafen was characterized by a speedy economic growth, and Augsburg remained fairly stable as a traditional merchant and industrial city.

Resorting to a broad sample of sources, from local archives to the press and personal memoirs, Zimmer approaches the ways in which the ‘rhythms of life’ changed in all three towns by selecting a number of topics: the evolution of local

economy and the debates on schooling, which was considered to be the key for the future; the evolution of the categories of citizen and resident in the face of increasing inner immigration and social change; the local debates on 'progress' that reflected a 'moral narrative' of national identity, embracing such issues as public health and sanitary infrastructures; as well as the enactment of ceremonies and festivities, in order to grasp the 'hidden rhythms' (173) of public and private life. The author focuses on two examples, the commemoration of the German victory against the French in 1871, the Sedan Day and the Catholic festival of the Corpus Christi, seen as classic fields of local dispute between national-liberals and Catholic conservatives. The author gives the reader a detailed view of this variegated set of dimensions, which are dealt with separately. Although both in the introduction of each section ('Journeys', 'Place-Makers' and 'Rhythms') a comparative outline is sketched, the narrative weight of local dynamics in some parts takes the lead in each chapter, while some of the central arguments and issues raised by the author get lost amidst the abundance of data and examples described. Yet, as Zimmer rightly points out, these 'mundane affairs' that stirred up local debates and caused ordinary people to get engaged in struggles over the rhythms of life made nationalism pertinent, as national identity offered a narrative that encompassed the necessity of change: the local progress was regarded as the national progress.

In his brilliant conclusions (293–306), Zimmer manages not only to sum up his main results and to draw a convincing conclusion, but also to address some central issues for historical research, such as his rejection of modernization theory as a predictable process, as well as his reluctance to observe the process of nation-building from a top-down perspective. Likewise, he clearly gives preference to agency over structure: local actors had, in his view, the ability to improvise and adapt to changing circumstances, by imposing their preferences on the rhythms of life, following different paths: nationalism was not a merely a project imposed or proposed by elites or by the state, but a complex 'dance... a form of social exchange and interaction' (303). The author stresses not only the role of agency, but also the autonomy of the local sphere, and insists on both the performative and flexible quality of collective identity, underpinning the intrinsic diversity of those local spheres, which cannot be reduced to a general pattern. Yet, nationalist arguments were used by actors precisely as a 'moral justification' for those who wanted to delegitimize traditional rhythms and were convinced that progress had to maintain its pace.

Certainly, some of the issues raised in this book have already been suggested by several studies on regional and national identities, both in the German context and elsewhere, from Maiken Umbach to Alon Confino. Yet, Zimmer bridges an innovative and detailed comparative analysis of the relationship between the urban context, the personal and social experience of time and place, and the national idea in nineteenth-century Germany. The book is also rich in suggestions for comparative research on European nationalism. In fact, an open question remains the extent to which this model could be extended to other European *nationalisms*.